

one of the weakest and fraught economies in generations.

At the start of the pandemic, the U.S. unemployment rate spiked to 14.7 percent. Last February, the Congressional Budget Office forecasted that the United States would not see 3.9 percent unemployment for another 5 years. The unemployment rate now is actually 4 percent. America's economic recovery is breaking records. The United States was the first country in the G7 to recover all of its GDP lost by the pandemic. Average wages were up 5.7 percent last month from a year ago. The increases were not all at the top; workers in the middle and lower rungs of the economy earned more too.

I have to say, as important as that is, we all know that people working in this economy are also facing inflation and higher prices. Whether it is for gasoline or groceries, they are finding it more expensive to meet the basic necessities of life. Although this is good news, that is bad news that we have to address and should address on a bipartisan basis.

The progress that we have made was not inevitable; it was a product of good old-fashioned American ingenuity. It is also the result of bold and decisive economic decisions by the Biden administration.

The American Rescue Plan, which Congress passed without the support of a single Republican Member of Congress—all Democrats all the way—broke the grip of the pandemic on our economy. We were able to get shots in arms, help small businesses stay afloat, and rush emergency assistance to people who had lost jobs or had seen their hours cut drastically. That emergency help worked in Illinois, and it worked all over this country.

We also passed the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. Let me remind those who follow, if you are wondering about the infrastructure bill passed by the Trump administration, let me put your concern to rest. There was no bill. There was no legislation. There was no infrastructure plan despite President Trump's repeated promises to deliver one. He walked away from the table, and I was in the room when he did. He wouldn't even negotiate.

We have not fixed all of the weaknesses in our economy. The jobless rate among Black workers is still twice that of White workers. Unemployment among teens and young adults is still too high. Research from the National Women's Law Center shows that, while men have recouped all job losses since the pandemic started, there are nearly 1.1 million fewer women in the workforce. Daycare is part of that calculation, I might add. If we want to reach our full economic potential, we need to help families find affordable, quality daycare, and we have to address the issue of inflation nonstop.

UNITED STATES INNOVATION AND COMPETITION ACT

Mr. DURBIN. Madam President, last year, for the first time in more than two decades, America's economy grew faster than China's. That is incredible. Let's keep that streak going by passing USICA, the bipartisan U.S. Innovation and Competition Act. We need to promote products made in the United States by Americans and purchased in the United States. We passed it in the Senate last June by a vote of 2 to 1. The House passed its version last Friday. Let's go to conference and get this bill into law. If we negotiate in good faith, I believe we can do that.

I want to thank Leader SCHUMER and Senator YOUNG, a Republican from Indiana, for their leadership.

This will boost competitiveness with China and help to reindustrialize America, make investments in manufacturing and research, and provide seed money to create good new jobs. Importantly, it includes \$52 billion for research and designing and manufacturing semiconductor chips—what Senator CANTWELL, chair of the Commerce Committee, calls the “oil of the 21st century.” Let's agree to make those chips here in America and not be dependent on importing them from China.

USICA also allows for new sanctions against China for human rights violations. We can stand up for American workers and American values.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. GRASSLEY. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. DUCKWORTH). Without objection, it is so ordered.

OFFICE OF NET ASSESSMENT

Mr. GRASSLEY. Madam President, on November 18 of last year, I came here to speak about the Office of Net Assessment. That is an office within the Pentagon. That office's purpose, under law, is to produce an annual net assessment, which is supposed to be a long-term look at our military's capability and those of our greatest adversaries. I don't think it lives up to its mission.

In 2018, according to the Director of the Office of Net Assessment, that office had not produced a net assessment since 2007. Not doing its job for those 11 years and—who knows—possibly longer calls into question whether this office should even exist. Yet a recent inspector general report states that the office “produces . . . highly classified net assessments.” I question the IG's conclusion based upon available evidence that I know about, and I will give some of that evidence.

In last year's speech here in the Senate and others that I have given over the years on this subject, I discussed my oversight of this office dating back to 2019. I also discussed my amendment to the national defense bill. That amendment would have done one very simple thing: required the Government Accountability Office to determine how much taxpayer money the Office of Net Assessment actually uses for net assessment—its purpose for existing. I want to know how much we can cut from their budget to save the taxpayers money.

Apparently, this type of pro-taxpayer legislation was too much to ask for. Accordingly, it appears that the Office of Net Assessment in the Department of Defense gets to keep operating like a Pentagon slush fund for irrelevant and political research projects.

On February 5, 2020, the Director of the Office of Net Assessment told me:

We review all deliverables to ensure they're consistent with the statement of work. We evaluate each deliverable to assess whether we should seek additional information or require a resubmission of commissioned work.

Now, I am going to return to that statement in a little bit, but I want to give you some evidence of why what he said doesn't work out in reality.

In December 2020, I asked the inspector general to take a deeper dive into the Office of Net Assessment's contracting practices. That means connecting all the dots in the contract transactions to ensure that everything matches up. The inspector general reviewed 20 contracts. On January 25 of this year, the inspector general issued its results and found these three or four points:

Office of Net Assessment acquisition personnel inappropriately performed contracting officer representative duties for 20 contracts.

Next point. Office of Net Assessment acquisition personnel and an office providing contract support did not maintain complete contract files, including preawards and contract administration documentation. That also included the failure to maintain signed contracts and modifications. Since 2019, I have repeatedly asked for a full accounting of Stefan Halper's contracts. Either they never had one or they have decided to obstruct Congress.

Next point. Office of Net Assessment acquisition personnel and an office providing contract support inappropriately approved invoices for payments totaling \$9.8 million dollars due to the lack of oversight. And that is just for the 20 contracts the inspector general sampled. So without required supporting documentation for payment, the door is, obviously, wide open to fraud, theft, and improper payments.

Next point. Without established and documented surveillance measures for Office of Net Assessment service contracts, the Office of Net Assessment may not have received all services outlined in a contractor's statement of work.